

## **Worse Than It Seems** by **AchieverHuntment**

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**Summary:**

Richie visits Neibolt by himself and runs into a familiar face.

## Worse Than It Seems

### Author's Note:

This story takes place before the projector scene in the first movie; Richie has yet to see *It/Pennywise*, but has heard the stories from the rest of the Losers.

He wasn't sure why he ever decided it was a good idea, but there Richie was, standing on the sidewalk in front of the infamous crackhouse of Neibolt Street.

Him and the rest of the Losers had walked by it hundreds of times while living in Derry; it always sort of scared them, but so did every other creepy old house. Creaking floorboards and broken windows, noises coming from under the porch. Yeah, Richie himself had had his fair share of nightmares about the place. Not that he would've told anyone about that.

But then Eddie brought it up. How he saw a leper there, and it chased him until it turned back into the clown. *The clown*, Richie shuddered. He hadn't seen *It* himself, no, but everyone else seemed to have. Mike saw *It* at the butcher's, Bill saw *It* in his basement, Ben saw *It* in the library, Stan saw *It* at the synagogue, Bev heard *It* and saw *It* as blood in her sink. Everyone but him.

So, yeah, he knew it was stupid. But he still had that adolescent desire to fit in with everybody. What made him different? Why hadn't he seen *It*? He hated feeling left out more than anything.

So he walked up deteriorating steps, slowly building his courage as he neared the entrance to 29 Neibolt. He braced himself, and eventually pushed the door open, only to immediately walk into a spiderweb.

"Fuck!" he spat as he pulled the webs from his face. Already off to a bad start, he continued anyway. He didn't feel particularly confident about how the encounter would go, but he had a slingshot tucked into one pocket and a bunch of good rocks stashed in the other. Him, Stan, and Bill had hunted for them in the Barrens a few weeks ago. It

was better than going in empty handed.

Now that he had crossed the threshold, he could see all the parts of the house he'd only ever glanced at through windows. A large staircase was the centerpiece, accompanied by a fireplace that was about one brick away from crumbling, and topped off with several empty beer bottles and other trash that littered the floor.

Rotting furniture was pushed back into corners, collecting dust and termites and all sorts of nasty things Richie didn't even want to think about. He stood up tall and looked around the first floor. Now he was starting to think he should probably just leave, this was a waste of time, maybe—

"Hello?"

A small voice came from a side room, behind a closed door, that made Richie's skin crawl. Suddenly the place felt cold, and clouds outside began to cover the sun and make the whole place even darker.

Okay, now it was definitely time to leave, right? *No*, Richie decided. *I'm gonna get my shit together, see what the big deal is with this stupid clown, and leave. Then I'll have something to talk about with everyone else.*

"Who's there?" he tentatively asked.

The door that separated him from the voice squeaked on its hinges. A small pale hand rested on the surrounding frame.

"I'm serious, I'll fuck you up!" Richie threatened, but his words came out shaky. His entire body was trembling with fear. He reached for his slingshot.

"Richie?" the voice asked. A face appeared in the darkness; shadows made it look gaunt and tired, but Richie would recognize it anywhere.

"Eddie?!" he sputtered. "Dude, what in the absolute *fuck* are you doing here?"

Eddie finally stepped out of the room. He looked just as terrified, wringing his hands and taking very small steps towards his friend.

"Jesus Christ, I thought you were that fucking leper or something, what the fuck? I could ask you the same exact thing," he returned, relief in his voice. He approached Richie, looking up at the taller boy.

"No, fuck you! I just about shit my pants, why'd you have to be all creepy like that?" Richie laughed nervously, and put back a rock he had pulled from his ammo pocket.

"I didn't mean to!" Eddie yelled, then sighed. "When I was here last week, and I got chased, I dropped a bunch of my shit. My mom's been up my ass about getting my pill case back. I don't know, I guess it's some expensive one or something, so I've been trying to find it," he paused again. "Seriously though, why are *you* here?"

"Oh," Richie said, pursing his lips. "I was trying to find um... a bottle of beer."

"Really? Are you kidding me? I know you're lying, what's the real reason?"

"Well..." he started. "Everyone else saw It and I felt left out. I thought if I came here maybe I could... I don't know, it's dumb."

"Yeah, it is! You're one of the lucky ones, why would you actively try and seek out a fucking psycho murder clown?!"

"I don't know dude, I just wanted to be involved in all your guys's clown conversations!"

"Oh big surprise there, you can't talk about something for once and you lose your mind. Figures."

"Seriously, fuck you. Guess I'll just leave now, It's probably not gonna show up if we're both here. Goddammit," Richie cursed and turned back towards the entrance (which he wasn't very far from anyway—he had only gone about a dozen feet into the house).

"Hey, before you go, can you help me find my shit?" Eddie quietly asked. He sounded uncertain, like he didn't wanna make Richie do

anything, but he was still desperate. "Please?"

Richie spun around again. Eddie's face was red, almost like he had been crying. Richie could feel his heart skip a beat just at the thought of Eddie being sad.

"What's it look like? The pill case?" Richie asked.

"It's pink. I feel like it'd be impossible to miss, but I've been here like thirty minutes and still haven't seen it."

"Where did you drop your stuff? More importantly, why was your fanny pack unzipped in the first place?" There was a beat. "No, never mind, you were taking out your inhaler, weren't you?" Richie grinned.

"Maybe it doesn't fucking matter why it was unzipped. Anyway, I got chased into the house and back into this room," Eddie gestured to the doorway he had appeared from. "I dropped some of my shit, but didn't have time to pick it all up, on account of the fact I was *about to be murdered* by a literal demon clown."

"Okay, okay, maybe you're right. I don't want to see that," Richie kicked at the floor. "Okay, pink case. Got it."

He started back towards the room Eddie mentioned, the younger boy trailing behind him as he entered. It was just as dusty as the rest of the house, but there was a section of the floor that was completely missing.

"Don't even think about it," Eddie said for him. "I don't want to go down there, Rich."

"But maybe that's where..?"

"You're probably right but I really, really don't want you to be. Like this place isn't already disgusting enough, I have to drop down into a moldy floor hole. Ugh."

Eddie had that disgusted look on his face that he seemed to wear pretty often. Something about it entranced Richie, the scrunched up nose and judgy eyes. He caught himself staring, just for a quick

moment, before jumping to action.

"I can look for it, but I'd need a flashlight first."

"Here," Eddie reached into his fanny pack and pulled out a small handheld flashlight. It was powered by a crank on the side that had to be spun every twenty or thirty seconds.

"Ah, you're always prepared for this sort of thing, aren't you?"

"Yeah, dipshit, maybe now you'll see the benefits of the pack."

"*Fanny* pack."

"It's a waist pack."

"Come on dude, don't rob it of its true name. Fanny! Fanny!"

"Knock it off! Just, be a doll for me and look down there already, will ya?"

Richie blushed a little at that— it sounded so old-timey and sweet coming from such a usually vulgar and angry mouth. Playfully, he pushed at Eddie's shoulder, both as an act of friendship, and to move him back from the hole in the ground. He didn't want Eddie to slip in or anything like that.

As he turned the noisy crank, a dimly lit spot in the room below them showed a glistening pink piece of plastic, tucked under a busted chair.

"Dude, it's right there! Let's just go downstairs and get it."

"The door to the stairs is blocked by something," Eddie sighed. "I already tried it."

"Well, maybe I can drop down there and you can help me back out. I'll stand on whatever's left of that chair down there."

"Seriously? You'd do that for me?"

"Sure. You're too big of a pussy to do it yourself anyway," Richie

teased, sticking his tongue out.

"Shut up! If you're gonna do it, just do it!" Eddie snapped and swatted a hand at his friend, but a smile was pulling at his lips.

Richie eyed up the spot in the floor and slowly began to realize it was a lot tinier than he thought at first. He sat on the edge of the floor, and let his legs drop through. But as he tried to slide down, it wasn't wide enough for his body.

"Fuck," he grumbled, pulling himself up. "No can do, Eds. Is this thing really that important?"

"Yes!"

"Well, maybe just save up your allowance and get another one then."

"My name's engraved on this one!"

"Really? Man, every time I learn something new about you it just makes you look like an even bigger dweeb."

"Oh my god, beep beep! Let's figure something out."

Eddie paced around the hole. He had a look on his face like he already had a solution, but didn't want to say it out loud.

"What if you..." Richie started.

"I know where this is going. And I told you, I'm not doing it."

"I'll be here the entire time! I can pull you out no problem, you weigh like 15 pounds soaking wet."

"If you couldn't fit, I'm not going to either!"

Richie laughed. "Just try. You're lying to yourself if you think you're the same size as me."

"I just haven't hit my growth spurt yet," Eddie mumbled. "Fine. But I'm not going to fit."

Eddie sized up the spot, and got his legs in the same as Richie had. As

he started to lower himself down, he fit almost perfectly.

"Oh Jesus Christ it smells like shit down here," he gasped out, still holding himself up by the edge of the floor. "Richie! Richie, there's cockroaches everywhere, and black stuff smeared on the walls. Richie I can't get my inhaler, Richie—"

"Dude, calm down!" Richie told him, but he seemed freaked out as well. "Just drop to the floor, then you can get it."

"I'm too high up, I'm gonna break an ankle!"

"No you're not, it's like three feet," Richie reassured. He had moved to kneel by the hole, watching Eddie hang there. "Be a brave little toaster for me!"

"Shut the fuck up, I'm doing it," Eddie said over rapid breathing. He slowly unlatched his fingers from the floorboards and dropped down.

*Plunk*, and it felt like the whole house shook with him.

"Richie, please, the flashlight," he whined.

"Oh yeah, sorry," and Richie cranked the light on again, aiming it directly in Eddie's eyes.

"Stop it! Stop! I can't see!" Eddie yelled, squeezing his eyelids shut. Richie stopped, but still giggled to himself.

"Hey, why don't you take a puff of your inhaler, man," he said with a stoner voice. "I know that'll like, calm you down dude."

"Oh yeah," Eddie said, somehow forgetting he had just been hyperventilating. He pulled the inhaler out and spritzed it down his throat. "Hey, I see it."

"Eds, I always thought your pill case was blue."

"I told you, it's a nicer new one," he called up, a bit angry. Soon it was back in his fanny pack, which he promptly zipped closed. "Okay, pull me the fuck up."



Richie nodded and reached his arms down. He figured he wouldn't be able to reach without Eddie standing on something, but he thought he might as well just try.

Even with his long arms, his assumption was right.

"Prop that chair up, it'll give you a few inches. Then I can get your hands," Richie instructed.

"Stop talking about my inches, I'm still growing," Eddie chuckled. "Okay, I'll try."

As Richie waited he felt his face get a little hot. It was just an offhand dick joke, and it wasn't even a good one. But Eddie didn't make those kinds of jokes often. It was just funny to hear him say it, that was all.

The old chair screeched across the floor as Eddie moved it where it needed to be. There were only three legs left, but it would still boost him about a foot off the ground.

Without a word, he was balancing on it, tiptoes lifting him just a teensy bit higher. Richie reached down again. His fingers brushed Eddie's, but it still wasn't quite enough to take hold.

"Fuck dude, this isn't good, I shouldn't have come down here," Eddie started to breathe heavily again. "I'm gonna be stuck down here."

"No you're not," Richie swore, but he was worried too. "What else is down there?"

"Bugs, bugs, and more bugs— aah!" He screamed and jumped as a particularly large roach crawled over his foot. "Richie, I'm scared." He looked up at the other boy, eyes brimming with tears.

"It's gonna be fine, Eds, don't worry," Richie said, but he could feel his own throat starting to constrict with panic.

"Richie, please help me," he cried out, hands still reaching upwards.

"There's gotta be something else you can use, there's gotta be," Richie hoped, looking around the room below for something, anything. "If not I can— I could find a rope, or—"

"Just hurry, I don't feel good about this!"

*Neither do I*, but Richie tried to keep a level head. *Just try and find something useful.*

He looked around on his level of the house. Crappy furniture, more crappy furniture. Maybe he could send some of it down there, but most of it was too big to fit. Then in the corner of the room, he saw some wooden milk cartons. Perfect.

"Eddie, take these," he told him, handing down some of the crates. They were held together by a few shitty nails, but it wasn't like they would be supporting a ton of weight anyway.

"This could work, this could work," Eddie told himself, catching the boxes as they came down. He missed one of the three, and it fell apart as it hit the ground. "Shit!"

"It's okay, there's still plenty up here," Richie heard himself say, but turning back to where he had found them, there wasn't any left. "Just uh... Put one of top of the other. Stack 'em."

"Richie, it's not going to work!" Eddie said, voice cracking. "I'm gonna be stuck down here forever!"

"Dude, calm down," the other boy mumbled. "Just try it!"

Eddie put one on top of the other, then carefully climbed up. Richie kneeled down again and reached for his friend's hands. Despite being higher off the ground this time, he felt further away.

"What the fuck, I hate this house," Richie said, really starting to freak out now. There had to be something else, or maybe he could actually find a rope somewhere, but he definitely didn't want to leave Eddie alone.

"Richie," his voice raised up from below, startling calm now. "I think It's down here."

"Don't fuck with me like that."

"I'm not joking, there's a fucking balloon, a *fucking balloon!*" he

shrieked, tumbling backwards off the crates and falling into a wall.

Richie could feel himself starting to tear up. *This isn't helping, stop crying you bitch.* "Are you okay?!"

"I guess," Eddie groaned. The balloon he mentioned had now floated to where Richie could see it. It read 'I ♥ □ Derry', but the white text was extremely faded. "You gotta get me out of here Rich, I'm serious."

"You could try jumping off the boxes, maybe I could reach you then?" Richie suggested, cranking the flashlight on again so they could both see. The gears inside ground against each other obnoxiously.

Eddie got back up, set the crates in place again, and got ready to jump. He was shaking.

"Are you going to catch me?"

"I'm gonna fucking try dude, come on," Richie said, outstretching his arms. His knees were scraped up from kneeling on the splintered wood floor for so long.

With a giant surge of effort, Eddie pushed himself off the boxes. Despite his height disadvantage, he had a stupid amount of energy (like most little boys did) and could actually jump fairly well. His hands met Richie's and they both held on for dear life.

"Holy shit, holy shit!" Eddie gasped. "Pull me up dickhead!"

"What the fuck else would I do?" Richie asked incredulously, and used all his strength to start lifting Eddie up. But there was some sort of resistance that wasn't letting him. *What the fuck—?*

A bloodcurdling scream shocked Richie out of his stupor, and he could now see a gnarled hand was holding onto Eddie's ankle. Claws were growing between the knuckles, and slowly piercing the boy's leg.

"RICHIE!" he shrieked, blood already spilling from the wound. "PLEASE HELP ME!"

"What the fuck am I supposed to do?! He's gonna—" *tear your leg off*

"—get you if I let go!" Richie yelled back. His feet braced against the rickety floor, he pulled as hard as he could while still leaving some slack. He didn't want to tear Eddie's leg up any more than it already was.

"I don't know, just do something! Please!" Eddie howled, shaking his leg as hard as he could. His movements were jerky, but they must have been enough. The hand lost grip for a single moment, and in that split second, Richie yanked his friend so hard they both flew back a solid ten feet.

"Holy fuck," Richie mumbled after a moment. He looked at Eddie; his eyes were wide but hollow, and he suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh my god, thank you dude, thank you!" he squealed, pulling the taller boy into a huge hug. It was so tight it almost hurt.

Richie hugged him back, and buried his face in his friend's hair. *I almost lost you, you were almost killed—*

"Are you crying too?" Eddie asked.

"No," Richie lied.

"It's okay if you are, it's kind of nice."

"What, that I'm scared and upset? Because my best friend just about —" *died* "—got eaten by a clown?!"

"No, that you care about me," Eddie hummed. "You're just usually such a prick that I can't tell sometimes."

"Of course I care about you," Richie said quickly. "It's just fun to rile you up. You know that, right? That I mess with you 'cause I like you?"

*Poor choice of words.*

Eddie laughed. His hands, still wrapped around Richie, had moved to rest on the older boy's waist. "Yeah, I know. I guess I like you too, even if I yell at you a lot."

Richie smiled, a blush starting in his cheeks. "Oh shit, your leg," he remembered, looking down at Eddie's ankle. It wasn't as bad as he thought it would be, but it was still pretty bloody. "You got something in your fanny pack for this?"

Eddie nodded, and finally pulled away from their hug to root around for disinfectant. He was surprisingly calm about it, and took out a small bottle along with some bandages.

"How's it feel that this shit is finally coming in handy?" Richie joked, taking the medical supplies from his friend, and assessing the wound.

"Just wonderful."

"I bet," Richie continued. A hand holding Eddie's calf, he cleaned the puncture marks, then put on two band-aids. Eddie watched with careful eyes, like he didn't fully trust him to do a good job. But it must've been enough, because he let out a small *harrumph* noise when Richie had finished.

"Huh? Did I do something wrong?"

"No," Eddie sighed. "I just expected you to be worse at this. You did fine, actually."

Richie grinned at the compliment. "Really? Damn, maybe I could replace you as the official Loser's Club doctor?"

"Yeah, no. As a matter of fact," Eddie reached to take his first aid stuff back from Richie. "Your knees are all scraped up. You're definitely gonna get blastomycosis if you don't disinfect those."

"What the fuck is—?"

Eddie was already pouring loads of the strong smelling disinfectant onto his hands and delicately coating Richie's knees with it. The taller boy hissed at the sting, but powered through.

"You've got a bunch of fucking splinters in there too dude, but I'm not touching those," Eddie declared, shaking his head. "Just use some tweezers. And don't let them break off and get trapped, because they can travel through your bloodstream and end up lodged in your

heart."

"What?"

"Just trust me on this," he said, and finished his work by wiping off the excess goop with the bottom of his shirt. "Okay, that should tide you over for a while."

"Thanks man," Richie said, sounding legitimately grateful. The scrapes still buzzed with that initial stinging feeling, but he trusted Doctor Kaspbrak's medical opinion, so he didn't mention it.

"Yeah, I guess it works as some sort of payment for, you know, saving my life," Eddie paused. "Unless, there's something else you want?"

"Huh?" Richie's eyes widened.

"Like, I have some rare Garbage Pail Kids I might be willing to give you. I'd have to think about it though, they're pretty good."

"Oh, yeah," Richie said, a bit disappointedly. "*That's* what you meant."

"Anyway," Eddie continued, brushing past Richie's comment. "I'm actually really thankful, dude. I should never have come here by myself, and you probably shouldn't have either. We're lucky we're both still alive."

"It was pretty fuckin' awesome that you went down there by yourself though. Kinda hardcore, if you ask me."

"I think it's cooler you were ready to go down there yourself," Eddie smiled. "You're always so willing to drop everything for me, which I don't understand. But I love you for it."

There was a beat. "W-What?" Richie stuttered, just like Big Bill would have. He could feel his stomach drop, and his face became flushed. *Does he know? No, how could he? Maybe he feels the same way..?*

"I um... I love you too, dude."

Eddie looked up at him. His eyes were partially hidden under messed up hair. "Oh, I didn't mean that in like, a gay way," he scoffed.

Richie could feel his throat constricting again, this time with heartbreak. "Duh, I didn't either, I— I meant like, you know," he stumbled, looking at the ground. His glasses slid down his nose. "Friends, like friends love each other. Best friends."

Eddie laughed coldly. It made the hair on the back of Richie's neck stand on end. "I fucking hope so, I'm not some queer. Are you?" the smaller boy asked, shaking his head. "If you are, you're probably gonna get AIDS and die, just statistically speaking."

Richie started to tear up again. He didn't mean to, but he couldn't stop himself. "I swear I'm not," he insisted, scared and confused. "I promise I'm not!"

Suddenly, Eddie took Richie's face in his hands, and tilted his head up. His glasses slid back into place. "Look at me and tell me you're not gay."

Richie choked back a sob. "Eddie, what's wrong with you? You're not like this," he managed to get out.

"Answer the question."

"Why does it matter, what difference does it make?" Richie quietly said. He squeezed his eyes shut, both in an attempt to stop crying and to avoid looking at Eddie. "I already said I'm not!"

"What about last year, after we went to camp with Stan?"

"What? What about camp?" Richie let his eyes open again. Eddie's voice just sounded too genuine, and he almost felt bad. Big brown irises stared back at him, though it felt more like they were looking through him.

"When you walked in on me?"

Richie's face, already several shades of red, somehow went darker. The color was even tinging the tips of his ears. He never got this embarrassed, he was too good at playing it off with a dumb joke.

"I don't know what you're getting at Eddie, but I don't like it," he said, almost as a warning. "It was an accident!"

"I know you thought about me," Eddie drawled. His hands, despite how soft Richie knew they were, had become rough and calloused. They were starting to hurt the older boy's face with their grasp. "Late nights, pretending to think about girls, but we know it was *always* me."

"Eddie, please, why is this such a big deal, we can still be friends—"

"You're just a big faggot, aren't you?" Eddie's voice said back, though it sounded much more shrill. "And you're hopelessly in love with me. How cute is that?"

His grip became tighter. Richie let out a shriek of pain and tried to get away, but he couldn't. Eddie pulled him in closer, until their noses were practically touching.

It was weird. Under any other circumstance, he wouldn't have minded their closeness. But this was uncomfortably horrifying.

Eddie had a wild grin on his face, and wide eyes that were a mix of captivating and haunting. Richie tried to push his friend away but it wasn't working— *nothing* was working. He could no longer keep himself from crying.

The jokester, the funny kid, the quick witted trashmouth was now nothing but a mess of tears and snot and sweat, terrified out of his mind and for once, feeling utterly and completely powerless.

*Surely this can't be real, this... It has to be a dream. A terrible, terrible dream.*

"You're not Eddie," he said aloud, hoping that maybe the nightmare would end if he acknowledged it wasn't real. "You're just a figment of my imagination, you—you can't hurt me."

He held himself up, masquerading as if he was brave. And for a moment, he did feel particularly valiant. It was *his* dream, after all, he could be the hero if he wanted to be.

"If only that was true," Eddie replied, the color in his eyes starting to fade. It spilled like water from a leaky bucket, slowly pouring out over his lower eyelids and onto his cheeks in thin, streaky lines. The



two were so close that some of the stuff landed on Richie and burned his skin.

"What the fuck are you?!" he screamed, still trying to pull Eddie's hands off his face. They almost seemed glued there now, and Richie hated it. *Maybe this isn't a dream, maybe it's—*

And the realization finally hit him. Pale gray eyes now rested where brown once was, and Eddie's usual kind countenance was gone entirely.

"It's just me, Richie. It's Eddie! We've known each other since kindergarten, you don't recognize me?" the boy said. His face had begun to contort, and splotches of bright white were appearing on his cheeks and forehead. His mouth slowly began to upturn into a mocking smile, and he made kissy lips as it did. "What, you don't want a smooch from old Eds?"

Richie shook his head, crying so hard his tears were starting to fog up his glasses. "Just leave me alone you stupid clown, I know it's you under there!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, always such a smart boy," It said to him, but the voice was still his best friend's. "And handsome, too."

Eddie— well, It— stood up suddenly, forcefully pulling Richie with him. He had grown significantly, no longer taking the form a four-foot-something boy. He was so tall that Richie was completely lifted up off the ground.

Being held up only by his head didn't feel great, he quickly learned. The hands holding him in place started to grow dirty white gloves, surely crawling with bacteria that Eddie would've freaked out about if he was actually there.

"Just let me the fuck go, you freak," Richie said through a sob. He struggled to free himself from the monster, every movement hurting both his face and his neck.

"Not until you tell me," Eddie's voice said. "Not until you tell me the truth."

The brown streaks of iris that adorned Its face were slowly turning blood red, and curving up into daggers that pierced Its eyes. Orange tufts of hair began to sprout and replace brunette. It was almost done transforming.

"What truth? That you're an ugly fuck?" Richie tried, but he didn't sound nearly half as cool as he thought he would. Not to mention, his face suddenly became red hot where the gloves were holding him, like the material was aflame. He let out a garbled string of curses.

"You wouldn't say that about *me*, would you?" Eddie's voice continued. "That hurts my feelings, Rich."

"You're not Eddie! He wouldn't—" *holy shit my face fucking hurts* "—act like this! He's my best friend!"

Without warning, Richie was finally let go, and dropped to the ground. He was afraid of busting through the floor, and being be back at square one in the basement. He quickly went to feel his cheeks; they were raw, hand shapes burnt into each of them. His ass hurt too, from the fall, but that was minimal compared to this.

Standing over him was a disgusting combination of whites and reds and orange, dark grey silk and big stupid puff balls. It towered over the boy, with yellowed rabbit teeth and cracked skin. Drool spilled from Its open mouth.

Richie scooted backwards, trying to get away. But of course there was a wall behind him, of course he was totally cornered. The thing came closer, taking staggered but deliberate steps.

"Richie," Eddie cooed through the clown's mouth. "Tell me how you *really* feel about me, and maybe I'll let you go."

"Just leave me alone! Please," Richie begged. He kicked his legs up at the creature, but his attempts were futile. The hits that actually landed didn't phase It at all, and instead almost seemed to encourage It.

"What are you scared of?"

Richie didn't have much time to think about it, given the

circumstances, but still he wondered briefly. What was he scared of?

*People knowing. The Losers knowing. Eddie knowing.*

It didn't matter anymore. He was about to die, who cared if he was scared of something?

Then he remembered he hadn't come to Neibolt unarmed. His slingshot was loaded and pulled back in just a few seconds (he'd been practicing his quick draw for an embarrassing amount of time), ready to fire.

Richie knew it was stupid—he was about to use a rock to attack an inter-dimensional shapeshifter with no known weaknesses— but it felt better than doing nothing.

Though shoddily made, his weapon was pretty durable, and it could stretch a considerable distance backwards before being released. So with all his strength, he taut the sling, and launched a rock right into the ugly face that loomed over him.

Of course, nothing happened. But for a short moment it stunned the creature, and there was enough time for Richie to slip past It and head towards the exit.

Running quite literally for his life, he managed to get out of the back room, and he could see the open front door just couple dozen feet away. At least, until it suddenly slammed shut and he was trapped once again.

"Where do you think you're going?" It asked him, finally in its own grating voice.

Richie ran towards a window instead, and tried to slide it up, but the frame wouldn't budge. He turned to look at the thing behind him, getting closer and closer. He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting his final moments to be spent looking at a hideous clown.

The boy's dirty face was covered in random lines where tears had fell, and his glasses were stained with flecks of the dark stuff Eddie's eyes—no, It's eyes—had dripped on him. His knees still hurt and so did his cheeks, both red and raw from their injuries. Every part of him

seemed to ache. At least it'd be over with soon.

A hand tightly gripped his shoulder, and Richie let out a yelp. *Calm down, just let It do its stupid thing, and then you'll be dead and it won't matter anymore what people think about you—*

"R-Richie?"

*Don't open your eyes! It wants that, don't give it what It wants!*

"Richie!"

*That sounds a lot like— No, It's just tricking you again!*

The hand shook him, hard but not painful. The voice repeated his name a few more times before Richie gave in and looked.

The clown was gone; standing in front of him now was just Bill Denbrough, another friend he'd had since kindergarten, concern in his face and words stuck on his tongue.

"A-A-Are you o-o—?"

"Okay?"

Bill nodded.

Richie shook his head no. He looked Bill up and down. He seemed real, but so did Eddie.

"Where's the clown?"

"Y-Y-You saw th-the clown? W-What hap-happened?"

"He was *just* here, I don't..." Richie pulled himself from Bill's hand, backing away and glancing around the house. There was no sign of It, and Bill had suddenly just appeared? No way it could really be him.

"W-What's wr-wrong Rich?"

"You're not Bill."

"Huh?"

"You're just pretending to be him," Richie hissed. He continued to move away towards the entrance, and Bill let him. His brow was furrowed in confusion.

"R-Richie, I d-don't know what y-y-you mean."

"Yes you do! Just leave me alone, okay?" Richie reached the front door, which was open now. He stepped out into the sun again, fresh air hitting his face. Something shiny caught his eye, and he had to squint to see it in the midday light.

Oh. It was Silver, tossed aside haphazardly in the street. Her wheels were bent in opposite angles, and a paper lunch bag had fallen out of the basket onto the ground. It *was* Bill.

"Bill?" Richie called out, turning back into the house.

"Yeah?"

Richie looked his friend in the eye, then ran at him and pulled him into a huge hug. He hid himself in Bill's neck, suddenly not afraid to cry in front of someone else.

"Jeez," Bill mumbled, surprised, but hugged Richie back. After a moment he let go to break the hug, but Richie wouldn't move. He could feel the other boy's tears already spilling onto his shirt. Trashmouth *never* cried. Bill wrapped his arms around him again.

"Bill, I saw him, I saw the clown, he—"

"C-Calm down, it's-it's fine," Bill told him. "He's g-gone now."

"It's not fine," Richie sobbed. He was ashamed to be overly emotional like this, but also grateful to have somebody he trusted there to comfort him. "I almost died, he almost killed Ed— me, he almost killed me."

"B-But he didn't, d-did he?"

"No," Richie mumbled into Bill's shoulder. His glasses were pushed up onto his forehead.

"W-We should g-g-go outside," the older boy suggested.

Richie didn't immediately move. He took a moment, sniffing hard and quickly wiping away what tears he could. He finally let go. Him and Bill made eye contact; it was weird seeing Richie's eyes so red and puffy like that.

"Your face," Bill said quietly, also seeing the burn marks.

"I know," Richie replied, looking down at the floor.

The two made their way outside, and down towards Silver. Bill held a hand to Richie's back to guide him the right way, worried he couldn't see with how much he was crying. They made sure to get past the front gate before stopping, Richie collapsing to the grass and sitting with his knees pulled in.

Bill sat down next to his friend, and wrapped an arm around him.

"W-W-What did h-he show y-you?"

Richie let out another sob. It made Bill's stomach churn in a horrible way, seeing the boy who always wore a big smile and told dumb jokes look so devastated.

"It was just It, the clown," Richie said, but it didn't feel very convincing. And it wasn't— Bill could tell he wasn't telling the truth. But he wasn't going to press him about something he clearly didn't want to talk about.

"It's g-gonna be okay," Bill reassured. "We're st-str-stronger than It is. W-We can b-b-beat him."

"I don't know if we can though, Big Bill. He's pretty fucking awful."

Bill frowned. No, it wasn't going to be easy. There was no way in hell it would be. But he *needed* to kill that thing, needed to avenge his brother, needed to stop any other kids from getting killed. And all of the Losers would have to be strong and work together if they were going to finish It.

There was just too much fear still amongst them, though, and that

included himself. Fear was inevitable, something they'd always have to deal with no matter if they were in Derry or halfway around the world. But they could still overcome it, couldn't they? Put it behind them to fight for the greater good?

Seeing Richie have a breakdown next to him, the brightest and loudest of the group, made him feel a little hopeless. If even the most boisterous of them could be scared, it didn't bode well for their chances.

Bill walked Richie all the way home, pushing Silver alongside them. He went inside with him and even helped him put aloe on his burns (which Richie refused to explain how he got) and sat with him a while, at least until Mr. and Mrs. Tozier got home from work. Then they drove Bill home and Richie was alone again.

Just like Bev's dad couldn't see the blood, his parents couldn't see the bright red hand prints singed into his cheeks. They noticed his quietness though, and tried to get some conversation from him over the dinner table, but no luck.

When he fell into bed later that evening, his mom took his glasses off and tucked him in (the way she used to when he was little) and gave him a kiss on the top of his head. She sat with him a while, just like Bill had— not saying anything, but it was comforting nonetheless. When she finally left the room, Richie cried again, tears staining his pillow. He woke several times throughout the night, stricken with nightmares that almost exclusively involved Eddie.

He wouldn't be able to stop having the terrible dreams for at least another year afterwards. Even when the Losers defeated the clown, he would still occasionally wake up in a cold sweat, his head pounding and his stomach in knots. While the dreams became more vague over time, the main point always remained: Richie liked boys, and he would never be okay with it.

This wasn't a fear he could escape, no; this was a lifelong type of thing. A constant reminder that he was never going to be comfortable in his own skin, that'd he always have to hide himself from others. He would never feel whole, and would never let himself live and love how he wanted. He wouldn't allow himself the happiness because

didn't think he deserved it.